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Kai-man Kwan

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IS THE CRITICAL TRUST APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE INCOMPATIBLE WITH RELIGIOUS PARTICULARISM? A REPLY TO MICHAEL MARTIN AND JOHN HICK

Kai-man Kwan

In contemporary philosophy of religion, many philosophers, e.g., William Alston, argue that we should treat religious experiences as *prima facie* reliable unless we have reasons to doubt them. I call this a Critical Trust Approach to religious experience. John Hick and Michael Martin have argued that this approach is incompatible with a particularist solution to the problem of religious pluralism. I argue that this is a misunderstanding of the Critical Trust Approach. I further explore how a religious particularist who accepts this approach can deal with conflicts between presumptive data, and argue that the particularist approach to religious experience is not necessarily inferior to atheistic and pluralist approaches.

The Tension between the Critical Trust Approach and Religious Diversity

In recent years, there is a revival of the argument from religious experience among analytic philosophers of religion. John Hick was one of its early defenders. Richard Swinburne gave it epistemological sophistication by propounding and defending the Principle of Credulity which says that if it seems (epistemically) to one that *x* is present, then probably *x* is present unless there are special considerations to the contrary.¹ While William Alston does not agree with Swinburne on many (minor) points, his Doxastic Practice Approach to religious experience is structurally similar to Swinburne's. His *Perceiving God* is an impressive work which elaborates and defends this approach by arguing that it is practically rational to regard all socially established doxastic practices as *prima facie* reliable.² I will call this kind of approach the Critical Trust Approach (CTA). The Principle of Credulity is renamed The Principle of Critical Trust (PCT). The name highlights two major and interdependent components of this epistemology: 1) initial trust of our experiences; 2) critical examination of those experiences to see whether they are subject to defeaters. (The latter component is worth emphasizing because many tend to associate Swinburne's Principle of Credulity or Alston's Doxastic Practice Approach with uncritical blind trust.)³ According to John Hick, "Many of us today who work in the philosophy of religion are in broad agreement with William Alston that the most viable defense of religious belief has to be a defense of the rationality of basing belief (with many qualifying provisos which Alston has carefully set forth) on religious experience."⁴

The most serious problem that the CTA faces is religious diversity. Four



major approaches to account for the variety of religions and religious experiences are:

- 1) *Religious Exclusivism/Particularism*: only one world religion⁵ is correct, and all others are mistaken. I prefer the name "particularism" here because the word "exclusivism" has negative connotations. Furthermore, exclusivism is often defined by Hick and others primarily in terms of salvation: "exclusivism asserts that salvation is confined to Christians."⁶ It needs to be emphasized that religious particularism or exclusivism, as defined here, does not entail the above view. It is even compatible with the most inclusive interpretation of salvation, universalism, e.g., a particular interpretation of Barthianism.
- 2) *Religious Inclusivism*: only one world religion is fully correct, but other world religions participate in or partially reveal some of the truth of the one correct religion.
- 3) *Religious Pluralism*: ultimately all world religions are equally correct, each offering a different, salvific path and partial perspective *vis-a-vis* the one Ultimate Reality.⁷
- 4) *Atheism*: all religions are mistaken; there is no God and no transcendent realm.

What are the theological implications of the CTA, if any? Does it lead to some particular theological positions, e.g., pluralism? Is it compatible with, say, Exclusivism?— this is an urgent question because in endorsing the PCT, *initially all* religious experiences have to be accorded equal weight. Isn't it then difficult to maintain that only one world religion is correct? As Hick points out, the challenge is that "the same epistemological principle establishes the rationality of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc in holding beliefs that are at least partly, and sometimes quite radically, incompatible with the Christian belief-system. Belief in the reality of Allah, Vishnu, Shiva, and of the non-personal Brahman, Dharmakaya, Tao seem to be as experientially well based as belief in the reality of the Holy Trinity."⁸

Of course Alston has been keenly aware of this problem but he maintains two things: 1) although the problem of religious diversity will reduce the rationality of participating in the Christian Doxastic Practice, it does not destroy it altogether; 2) the solution of this problem does not necessarily lead to a pluralist hypothesis like Hick's theory; his approach is compatible with the rationality of a religious particularist position.⁹ In a *Festschrift* for Alston, several philosophers also advocate a particularist position.¹⁰ In the July 1997 issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Hick attacks these "conservative Christian philosophers" and a spirited debate between Hick, on the one side and Alston, Mavrodes, van Inwagen, Plantinga, and K. J. Clark, on the other, ensued. Hick's main purpose is to show that "we do not yet have any adequate response from conservative Christian philosophers to the problem of religious diversity."¹¹

A main argument of his is that Alston's experience-based apologetics for religion is incompatible with his exclusivism: "For if only *one* of the many

belief-systems based upon religious experience can be true, it follows that *religious experience generally produces false beliefs*, and that it is thus a generally *unreliable* basis for belief-formation": this is then "a reversal of the principle, for which Alston has argued so persuasively, that religious experience constitutes as legitimate a ground for belief-formation as does sense experience."¹² In other words, Hick thinks that the combination of CTA and religious exclusivism is self-undermining. This is also a very common objection raised against the argument from religious experience by atheists. For example, Michael Martin asserts that the deliverances of religious experiences are so contradictory that as a whole they are shown to be unreliable. As a result, the Principle of Critical Trust shouldn't be applied to religious experiences.¹³ While both Martin and Hick concur with the incompatibility of the CTA and religious exclusivism, and thus the untenability of the first approach, they draw different conclusions.¹⁴ Martin does not seriously consider the pluralist hypothesis, and thinks that the conflict between religious experiences tends to support the fourth approach, atheism. Hick maintains that a religious interpretation of reality is still possible in the face of the conflict between religious experiences. However, *only* his religious pluralism (the third approach) can save the day for those who do not accept atheism.

Hick also has other reasons for thinking that the CTA should lead to religious pluralism rather than particularism, e.g., the latter is arbitrary and unable to explain the roughly equal soteriological efficacy of the world religions. In this essay, however, I will concentrate only on the alleged incompatibility between the CTA and religious exclusivism¹⁵ which is regarded by D. Z. Phillips as a devastating criticism of Alston.¹⁶ I argue instead that it is the result of a misunderstanding of the CTA. Alston has already briefly indicated this misunderstanding: "even if most beliefs based on religious experience were false, that would not contradict the epistemological claims I make for religious experience" which is that "its seeming to one that some Ultimate Reality (UR) is presenting itself to one's experience as phi makes it *prima facie* justified that UR is phi."¹⁷ However, in view of its persistence, this objection deserves a fuller treatment. I argue below that the CTA is indeed compatible with particularism, *and also* that it is *more* consistent with particularism than with Hick's pluralism.

Applicability of the Principle of Critical Trust to Conflicting Experiences

The first question we should settle is whether the existing contradictions between religious experiences make the PCT inapplicable to them. It is a totally different one from the question: "*if we grant some evidential force to religious experiences, will such conflicts cancel this force?*" Let us first distinguish the PCT from the following Probable Inference Rule (PIR):

PIR If it seems to me that x is F, then probably x is F in the sense that it is more often than not the case that x is F.

A type of experience has type-reliability if more than half of its tokens are veridical. The applicability of the PIR to a type of experience is tied to its type-reliability. If it can be shown to be type-unreliable, then the PIR can

hardly be applied to it. In the case when the tokens of that type grossly conflict with one another, the type-reliability would be greatly in doubt and hence the PIR is not applicable. So the presence of massive contradictions do debar us from applying the PIR. However, the applicability of the PCT is not thereby endangered. To apply the PCT to some experiences is to have *initial* trust in them and, if they are defeated, to salvage as much as possible from them. The PCT does not entail the PIR. There is no contradiction in saying that we should have initial trust in conflicting experiences. There is no contradiction even between legitimately having initial trust in a type of experience and the fact that most tokens of that type turn out to be unveridical! Since the PCT is often compared to the presumption of innocence in law, let us consider the following legal analogy. Suppose in a certain democratic country both the common people and the legal authority are very cautious in prosecuting others. They will not do so unless overwhelming evidence is available. So it turns out that 99% of the suspects were convicted and not even one such verdict was found to be wrong. On the other hand, the legal procedure adheres strictly to the presumption of innocence as well. That the above scenario is obviously possible shows that there is no contradiction between these two statements: 1) each and every suspect was legitimately presumed to be innocent in the beginning; 2) the overwhelming majority of the suspects were in fact not innocent. Let me further illustrate this with the Parable of the Survivors.

Suppose a nuclear holocaust occurs and the survivors are badly hurt by radiation. Mutations occur such that during their seeing the proximal stimuli produced by external objects are *always* blended with internally generated noise. The result is that the apparent size, shape and color of a nearby object can vary for different individuals and can also vary from time to time for the same individual. The saving grace is that the noise level does not exceed the threshold which would destroy altogether the capability of object recognition. So the people can still, with difficulty, know that *some* object is around. The result is a kind of "vision" which can roughly locate a medium size object nearby but everything else is blurred and unstable. Notice that the erroneous perceptions are always integrated with the roughly correct identifications. Phenomenologically speaking, we can't separate these two kinds of perceptions: the bare recognition of object versus the more detailed perception of color, shape and size. In this case should those people accord some evidential force to their perceptions? Suppose they don't and instead they adopt initial scepticism towards their "perceptions." Namely, they insist that their perceptions have to be treated as "guilty until proven innocent." Can they demonstrate the reliability of their 'perceptions' by another means? Hardly! What about the availability of tests? There may not be effective tests which have consistent results. Scepticism results and would rob the people of the only information they still possess! This consequence seems to be counter-intuitive. Instead it is plausible to say the PCT is applicable here. By applying it, the survivors will come to trust their ability to locate medium size objects while not giving undue confidence to their color and shape perceptions. The PCT is "charitable" enough here without being unduly uncritical. The idea here is that although the "perceptions," described at the highest level of descrip-

tion, are grossly inconsistent, they do convey information about the reality at a lower level of description. Indeed the parable is suggestive. It shows that it is quite conceivable that even though religious experiences as a whole are not entirely accurate, they can be reasonably informative at a lower level of description. There is no *a priori* reason for believing that contradictions of experiences would entail their total unreliability.

Furthermore, almost all sorts of experience or doxastic practices produce conflicting beliefs sooner or later. Empirically speaking no experience which we commonly regard as reliable is completely free from this problem. (Just think of the empiricists' "argument from illusion.") So why do we think that the presence of contradictions in religious experience should debar us from having initial trust, at least to a small degree, in religious experience? We must have set a threshold amount of contradictions such that if any epistemic practice produces an amount of contradictions beyond this threshold, it will be subject to initial scepticism. In other words, there is a minimum degree of consistency before a kind of experience can be treated as *prima facie* reliable. Unfortunately, it is not clear how this *absolute* threshold can be determined. (It is not clear how degree of contradictions can be precisely measured.) To draw the line with sensory experience alone on the clean side and the rest on the dirty side seems arbitrary and unduly restrictive. On the other hand, suppose we take into consideration various experiences and epistemic practices which do produce contradictory judgments to different degrees, e.g., memory, introspection, moral experience, aesthetic experience, logical intuitions, historical investigation, philosophy, literary criticism, "revolutionary science" (in Kuhn's sense). It then seems implausible to assert any absolute threshold of tolerable contradictions. We have yet to see a good argument for not granting some defeasible evidential force to religious experiences sheerly because of their alleged contradictions.

However the degree of contradictions in a type of experience does have epistemic relevance: it serves as a possible defeater of the *prima facie* justification of experiences. If a kind of experience has absolutely no stability and recognizable consistency, surely we can discount it. Here John Baillie's comments seem to be judicious. He admits that, in discussing moral judgments, "if there were *no* degree of consensus as to what is right and what is wrong, we might well come to feel that our moral judgments were no more than individual seeming."¹⁸ However he contends that "when we pass to the higher regions of our experience, to what we have called our subtler and more delicate awareness, we do not expect universal agreement." The middle way he adopts is that "*some considerable measure of agreement*, though it is still not a 'test of truth,' is normally a necessary condition of the security of individual judgement."¹⁹

Dealing with Conflicts: Critical Trust versus Absolute Scepticism

If the above argument is correct, then the PCT is applicable to conflicting religious experiences, and there is no logical incompatibility between the CTA and religious particularism. However, the atheists may still insist that religious particularism is still incongruent or incoherent (in a broad sense)

with the PCT. Unless the particularists can offer a plausible explanation of how the two go together, they maintain, the atheistic approach seems superior. The following is a response to this possible query.

First of all, it is important to note that the PCT does not license the irrationality of swallowing a grossly inconsistent set of beliefs. To have initial trust in contradictory experiences does not commit one to accepting all of them. On the contrary, this is only the first step to ensure a proper initial base on which we can then exercise our critical faculty rigorously. When conflicts between our presumptive data occur, there is a need for critical sifting. (That is why this approach is called the *Critical Trust Approach*.) However, in line with the spirit of the PCT, we should choose the consistent subset of the presumptive data which has maximum weight. Moreover, even when a token experience is defeated, we should strive to preserve the elements of truth in it. Before exploring this process of critical sifting in more details, in this section I want to defend the rationality of the above way of dealing with conflicting experiences vis-à-vis the atheists' alternative, which seems to presuppose the Sceptical Rule (SR):

SR When experiences or claims conflict with one another, we should reject all of them.

Should we adopt the SR instead? I don't think so. Consider the conflict of eye-witnesses' accounts of a certain event. It would indeed be irrational to reject all their accounts just because they conflict! (Contrarily it's ironical that perfect match between independent witnesses may sometimes induce suspicion.) It seems to be a rational strategy to try to reconcile their reports as much as possible. For example, a common core²⁰ can be identified. Another example: suppose a fleeting phenomenon led to conflicting reports: Peter reported seeing a plane, Paul a spaceship, and Mary an air-balloon. It is absurd to suggest that we should reject all their statements and think that nothing has happened. It is possible that one of them may be correct. At the very least we should accept the common content of their experiences. *Unidentified flying object* (UFO), vague though it is, is not a completely uninformative term. Moreover, if the SR is adopted, history would also be imperiled. It is well known that historical documents are liable to massive contradictions. However, we don't deduce from this that historical enquiry is utterly pointless and can tell us absolutely nothing. The job of the historian is to utilize all these materials to reconstruct the past by harmonizing them without producing too much strain in the overall interpretation. Consider the conflicting descriptions of a historical personality. These can sometimes be reconciled by the idea of perspective. A personality can be multi-faceted and manifest itself in different ways to different people. However, each person will usually accord an unduly high degree of ultimacy and immediacy to his encounter with that historical personality. Removing this aura of ultimacy, each person's experience of that historical personality can be seen to be true from his perspective. It is also a commonplace that many historical accounts of a momentous historical event, e.g., China's Cultural Revolution, are contradictory. It is difficult to determine the exact course or nature of this event but it would be pre-

posteriorous to deny that the Cultural Revolution has happened. All the above examples count against the sceptical policy and show that conflict of presumptive data is not irremediable.

Many critics argue that religious experiences are so contradictory that as a whole they must be unreliable. The apparent plausibility of this argument hinges on the ambiguity of the word "reliability." This can be used in a comparative sense. It is true that when a kind of experience yields more contradictory beliefs than those yielded by another, the former is less reliable than the latter. Hence the conflicts between religious experiences do show that they are more unreliable than, say, sensory experiences, but it does not follow that they are *absolutely unreliable*, in the sense that "no information can be gained from them at all." It is not true that whenever the token experiences conflict, the whole kind is suspect and hence "unreliable" in this sense. Even sensory experiences can't pass this test.

In this light we can evaluate Richard Gale's objection: he argues that religious diversities would render the PCT, which he calls "presumptive inference rule," inapplicable to religious experiences. He points out that there is "no analogous diversity of doxastic practices for basing claims about physical objects on sense experience that differ among themselves as to what counts as confirmatory and disconfirmatory of a given sense experience being veridical." He claims that "This is a cognitively invidious disanalogy that should destroy the requirement to extend the presumptive inference rule from the sense experience to the religious experience doxastic practice in the name of the principle of parity. There should be parity in their treatment only if they are sufficiently analogous."²¹ It should be clear that the objection is invalid because the disanalogy of religious experience with sense experience in this respect only shows that the former is much less reliable than sense experience. It would not show the absolute unreliability of religious experience unless sense experience is adopted as the paradigm. To do the latter is epistemic chauvinism.²²

Hick's claim that the particularist interpretation of the conflicting religious experiences is a reversal of Alston's principle that "religious experience constitutes as legitimate a ground for belief-formation as does sense experience" is similarly ambiguous. If it means that the conflicts show that it is legitimate to apply the PCT to sense experience but not to religious experience, then, as I have argued, it suffers from the confusion between the PIR and the PCT. If it means that the conflicts between religious experiences show that sense experience is a more reliable ground for belief-formation than religious experience, then Hick is making a true claim which is not a reversal of Alston's principle or the CTA. Either way, Hick's objection fails.

The distinction between comparative reliability and absolute unreliability can be further shown by the following thought experiment. Suppose an alien species possessed a kind of perception which was 99.99% reliable. One day they landed on the earth and started to investigate the intellectual powers of human beings. Although they found that our sense experiences were in fact 70% reliable, the conclusion of their report read, "Human beings are very inferior in their cognitive power because their sense experiences are very unreliable." Is aliens' judgment justified? Yes, in a comparative sense; but no, in an absolute sense.

To sum up, we need to distinguish several senses of reliability or unreliability:

- 1) Comparative reliability between different types of experience
- 2) Type-reliability
- 3) Type-unreliability:

Absolute type-unreliability: the type of experience is sheer delusion and reveals nothing whatever about the reality.

Lower-level reliability: although the type is unreliable at the highest level of description, it is reliable at a lower level of description (cf. the Parable of the Survivors). In this case, the type is a *loose type*.

Sub-type reliability: it is also possible that a sub-type of the type-unreliable experience can be reliable. This can be illustrated by the case of sense experience.

When we look at the deliverances of sense experience, we find statements about location, shape, size, color, smell, taste and (felt) temperature of physical objects. According to the PCT, all of these are *prima facie* justified. For common sense, a physical object (objectively) possesses properties of size, shape and location as well as of color and smell. However, the latter comes into conflict with the scientific view of a physical object which, according to that view, solely consists of colorless and odourless particles.²³ It becomes difficult to see how these physical objects can objectively possess color and smell. One solution is to make the distinction between primary qualities, e.g., shape and size, and secondary qualities, e.g., color and smell. The former are *really* qualities of the physical objects while the latter only *appear* to be so. In other words, this move involves a demarcation of sense experience into two sub-types: experiences of the primary qualities and experiences of the secondary qualities. The former are still literally *prima facie* reliable while the latter are interpreted as (partly) projections of the mind. Experiences of secondary qualities are not cognitively irrelevant but they are no longer taken at face value. Actually the two sub-types of sense experience do not literally contradict one another. Phenomenologically speaking, we can't distinguish one type from the other: experience of the whiteness of the paper and experience of its rectangular shape seem equally real and the two are integrated into a single experience of the sheet of paper. However, the best explanation of one type leads to an understanding of the physical object which contradicts another.

The conflict can be resolved in various ways. Some deny the conflict is real by offering alternative interpretations of common sense statements about physical objects. Others take an instrumentalist view of science. That these views are to some extent attractive shows that the *prima facie* evidential force of the experiences of the secondary qualities is quite strong. It seems very obvious that the paper in front of me *is really* white, for example. Nevertheless, if one thinks that the realist view of science and common sense is more plausible and the proffered ways of reconciliation are not convincing, then one has to re-interpret the experiences of color, etc. In my

terms, the *prima facie* evidential force of these experiences is indirectly defeated by the best explanation of our experiences of primary qualities. If the above account is correct, sense experiences are also indirectly inconsistent. (Martin, while insisting that many religious experiences are indirectly inconsistent, does not seem to realize that this could also be true of sense experience.) The common sense interpretation of experiences of secondary qualities is not strictly consistent with the scientific interpretation of them. The above resolution in favor of the scientific interpretation seems to reflect the following principle, The Principle of Conservation:

In resolving conflicts between experiences, try to adopt the best and simplest explanatory hypothesis which preserves the maximum *prima facie* evidential force of the (indirectly) conflicting experiences.

It should be noted that the above conflict does not result in a whole scale scepticism of sense experience nor rejection of science. Neither are the experiences of the secondary qualities wholly consigned to the realm of illusions nor completely eliminated. Those experiences are still real and they reflect something real, i.e., dispositional properties of physical objects. Again, it shows that conflicts of experience do not necessarily result in whole scale rejection. Why isn't this also true of religious experiences? Even if my account is not actually true of our sense experience, it can still illustrate a rational strategy to deal with conflicting presumptive data.

My conclusion is that the CTA's rules for sifting data are indeed rational strategies which are employed by us in daily life and by scholars in various disciplines. The need for such strategies is undergirded by the recognition that our cognitive input is fallible yet not totally unreliable. Knowledge is not an all-or-nothing matter. It is also untrue that either we have to accept an experience in its totality or reject it *in toto*. Generally speaking, the CTA seems to be a more realistic approach than the atheists' Sceptical Rule. Moreover, when we apply the former to conflicting experiences, various kinds of realism rather than whole scale scepticism may often be the outcome. Let us apply this approach to conflicting religious experiences.

Religious Experience as a Loose Type

Armed with the above distinctions and principles, we can come back to Martin's conflicting claims objection to religious experience: "Swinburne advises us when considering a new sense to assume first that by and large things are what they seem. ... this initial assumption must be quickly abandoned in the case of religious experiences. Religious experiences are often conflicting, and thus things *cannot* be what they seem. We must distinguish what is veridical and what is not, and there is at present no non-question-begging theory that enables us to do this."²⁴ Suppose he is correct about the degree of conflict. Does it follow that religious experiences as a whole have no evidential force at all? If my arguments are correct, this conclusion is unwarranted. The conflicts of religious experience may indeed show the type-unreliability of religious experience *at the highest level of description*. However, I will argue that religious experience is nevertheless a loose type

because a common core can be extracted from the diverse religious experiences at a lower level of description.

Let's elaborate the Parable of the Survivors. Consider their "perceptions" of the sun. When they look at the sun, they see some object *up there* but one sees it as round, another as square, and so on. Even worse, for an individual he sees it as square on Monday but round on Tuesday and hexagonal on Wednesday and so on. Obviously an object can't be both round and square at the same time. So the object *cannot* be identical to what it seems most of the time. Clearly the PIR can't be applied here. However the application of the PCT is another matter. If they accept this and apply it to their conflicting perceptions of the sun, they would at least arrive at the conclusion that there is a bright object of *some* shape up there. There is no need to adopt a reductionist account of the 'sun' as nothing but projections of their minds, i.e., to discount their experiences of the sun as absolutely unreliable. Similarly, despite the conflicts, religious experiences still point to the fact that there is another realm *up there* or *beyond*. In other words, although religious experiences taken as a whole hardly point to a determinate supernatural reality, they cohere in that they all point to *something beyond* the naturalistic world, i.e., the Transcendent realm. It *could* be fortuitous, of course. However, the collective weight of them should not be dismissed cavalierly. It could be defeated but not without good reasons.

The most important contradiction remains that concerning the *nature of the ultimate reality*. Is it personal or impersonal? Numinous experiences and theistic experiences seem to indicate that it is personal while *some* mystical experiences (e.g., the monistic type) seem to show it is impersonal. However, even this contradiction is not irremediable.²⁵ Suppose the ultimate reality is indeed personal. It is possible that a personal being can manifest himself in a non-personal way. The manifestation can still be veridical and revelatory. Consider Yahweh's epiphany to Elijah. God can be said to be manifested in the earthquake and the whirlwind but this is not yet a personal manifestation. If the epiphany stops at this level, the experient may even think that God is impersonal. However, the situation is transformed when the "still small voice" is added to the scene. The whole experience becomes an unambiguous personal manifestation. So a non-personal manifestation does not entail that the underlying reality is anti-personal. This is even more plausible when we realize that orthodox theists always maintain that God is more than personal, i.e., the human category of "personal" can't exhaust the nature of God. Of course, it can also be maintained that an Impersonal Absolute can manifest itself in personal ways. For example, some schools of Hinduism make the distinction between the *saguna-Brahman* (the personal manifestation of Brahman) and the *nirguna-Brahman* (the Impersonal Absolute and Ultimate). The present point is that it is by no means impossible to organize the diverse religious experiences into a coherent framework. Of course some revisionist moves are inevitable but the CTA does not forbid them, provided the resulting worldview is more coherent.²⁶

For example, Caroline Davis carefully sifts through the data and suggests the following as the common core:

" (i) the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centres of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.

(ii) ... there is a far deeper 'true self' which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality.

(iii) Whatever *is* the ultimate reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything else depends on it.

(iv) This holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence with whom individuals can have a personal relationship ...

(v) ... at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power ...

(vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being's *summum bonum*, his final liberation or salvation, and the means by which he discovers his 'true self' or 'true home.'"²⁷

Of course, this analysis is controversial and has to be backed up by detailed arguments. Nevertheless it can plausibly be maintained that we can extract a common core from the diverse religious experiences which points to the fact that this spatio-temporal world is not the Ultimate. There is more to what we can see. Religious experience as a loose type at least supports this modest conclusion. Martin's claim that the conflicts between religious experiences automatically render them completely useless as evidence for a religious worldview seems mistaken. While religious experiences themselves may not support a very determinate religious worldview, they at least tip the balance away from naturalism to some degree, if the PCT is accepted.

Critical Trust: Religious Particularism versus Religious Pluralism

What has been said above is also acceptable to a pluralist. Hick may argue that mere logical compatibility between particularism and the CTA amounts to very little, and that his pluralist hypothesis exactly expresses the common core of the diverse religious experiences. So his approach is still superior to particularism, given the CTA. I investigate this possible claim below. Note that I am not offering a comprehensive critique of Hick's position. Here I am concerned mainly with whether his pluralism is more coherent with the CTA than particularism. Since there are different kinds of religious particularism and the answer to the above question may vary with the kind of particularism chosen for consideration, I mainly consider the theistic interpretation of religious experiences below.

It is important to emphasize that a religious particularist need not reject *all* religious experiences in other religions. Only those which are truly incompatible with her faith need to be rejected. Now a theistic faith is of course largely compatible with the bulk of experiences of a personal God. Moreover, a theist need not reject all kinds of mystical experience. Theistic religions have their own mystics, who believe that their mystical experiences, e.g., union with God, rapture, are not only compatible with but also

integral to their theistic faith. The major type of religious experience which is clearly incompatible with theism, is monistic mysticism, e.g., the intuitive apprehension that Atman is Brahman and that All is One. This kind of experience, if veridical *at the highest level of description*, is incompatible with theism because the Ultimate disclosed in this kind of experience is not personal. However, as suggested above, theists need not completely consign all monistic mystical experiences to the rubbish bin. They can provide interpretations of monistic experiences which preserve their validity to different degrees.

Theists can maintain that some monistic experiences are the manifestation of the personal God in a non-personal way. It is not at all surprising that God will bring about these experiences, which enable us to see the emptiness of creaturely things and our inadequacies and liberate us from the attachment to things. Having these experiences can be the first stage in the quest for God. In interpreting these strictly as experiences of the impersonal Absolute, it is possible that either the mystics have misinterpreted their experiences or others have been misled by the mystics' language, perhaps under the influence of monistic traditions. Sometimes a monistic experience may just be an experience of the substance of one's soul which is indeed grounded in God. Maritain suggests, "The Hindu experience does appear therefore, to be a mystical experience in the natural order, a fruitive experience of the absolute, of that absolute which is the substantial *esse* of the soul and, in it and through it, of the divine absolute. And how could this experience, being purely negative, distinguish the one of these absolutes from the other? Inasmuch as it is a purely negative experience, it neither confuses nor distinguishes them. And since no content of the "essential" order, no *quid*, is then attained, it is comprehensible that philosophic thought reflecting upon such an experience inevitably runs the danger of identifying in some measure the one and the other absolute, that absolute which is the mirror and that one which is perceived in the mirror. The same word "atman" will designate the human Self and the supreme Self."²⁸

Now in comparison with the above type of particularism, is Hick's pluralism superior from the perspective of the CTA? I think not. Despite the lip service of the pluralist to the PCT, his hypothesis in fact does violence to *all* kinds of religious experience: they are all "true" of the Real, but only in a mythological sense. Hick explains, "I mean by a myth a story that is not literally true but that has the power to evoke in its hearers a practical response to the myth's referent- a true myth being of course one that evokes an *appropriate* response. The truthfulness of a myth is thus a practical truthfulness, consisting in its capacity to orient us rightly in our lives. In so far as the heavenly Parent is an authentic manifestation of the Real, to think of the Real as an ideal parent is to think in a way that can orient us rightly to the Real."²⁹ This is because the Real is ineffable and incomprehensible. The Real "is postulated as that which there must be if religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginative projection but is also a response to a transcendent reality."³⁰ Referring to attributes like personality, love, goodness, compassion, justice, mercy, intentions, consciousness, knowledge, etc., Hick says that "all these attributes are components of our human conceptual repertoire... an ultimate reality ... exceeds that

conceptual repertoire... It has its own nature, presumably infinite in richness, but that nature is not thinkable in human terms."³¹

This position has the drastic consequence that *no* religious experience is ever literally true of the Real, and no major type of religious experience captures even to some degree the nature of the Real. Despite all the talk that both theistic experiences and monistic experiences are authentic manifestation of the Real, from a *cognitive* and not practical standpoint, Hick is denying *in toto* the content of all these experiences.³² Hick says, "in denying that the Real is personal one is not saying that it is impersonal, but rather that the personal-impersonal dualism does not apply here."³³ This is to admit that Hick's pluralism preserves the *cognitive* validity of neither the theistic type nor the non-theistic type of religious experience in which the Real appears to be personal and impersonal respectively. In contrast, the above theistic interpretation successfully saves a significant portion of the phenomena, e.g., theistic experiences, and preserves to different extent the validity of other types of religious experience, e.g., monistic experiences. (Theists can agree that the nature of the Real is infinite in richness but this does not entail the ineffability of the Real. This infinite richness only entails that human terms can never *fully* capture or comprehend the nature of the Real.) This is consonant with the Principle of Conservation of the CTA. If Alston's position were the reversal of the PCT, then Hick's pluralism would be an even greater reversal! Of course, as I have argued, both particularism and pluralism are formally compatible with the PCT but the former seems to conform better to the CTA than Hick's pluralism.³⁴

Furthermore, the theistic interpretation preserves better the moral nature of the Real. Hick takes pains to demonstrate that the concern for the good is common to different religious traditions. For example, he seems to believe that extreme cruelty is incompatible with the nature of the Real, as implied by his condemnation of the Christian Church's misdeeds in history. However, under the constraint of his doctrine of ineffability, he has to say this: "I do not describe the Real *in itself* as good, or benign, or gracious. But in relation to us- that is, in terms of the difference that it makes to us- it is good as the ground of the transformed state which is our highest good. So the sense in which the Real is good, benign, gracious is analogous to that in which the sun is, from our point of view, good, friendly, life-giving... Likewise, the Real is the necessary condition of our existence and our highest good. It is in this sense that we can speak of the Real as being, in relation to us, good, benign, gracious. But when we describe the Real in itself in these terms we are speaking mythologically rather than literally."³⁵

This consequence is rather depressing. In contrast, theism can speak of the Real as literally or at least analogously gracious and good.³⁶ This is a merit from the perspective of the CTA because that the Real is good and gracious is the common content of many diverse religious experiences, and is endorsed by the major traditions. Given Hick's emphasis on the moral criterion, it is indeed strange that moral categories cannot even apply to the Real. On Hick's terms, can we say that extreme cruelty is *really* incompatible with the nature of the Real? No, we can only say that the Real is not the ground of cruelty, and so on. Is this kind of roundabout statement about the causal relationship between cruelty and the Real really expressing the

essence of our intuition, which Hick seems to share, that extreme cruelty is an *absolute* evil? It is clear that all these questions do not plague theism which can forthrightly say that extreme cruelty is logically incompatible with the holy nature of God. There is no need for theists to posit the tortuous noumenal-phenomenal distinction here.

Hick has likened the Real to the sun above. Let us come back to the survivors' conflicting perceptions of the sun in my parable. Now suppose there are three major schools about the shape of the sun: Round Sun School, Square Sun School, and Hexagonal Sun School. Further suppose all three schools are equally supported by the survivors' experience, and all of them cannot prove on neutral grounds the superiority of their positions. In this impasse there comes a Pluralist, who argues that each of the three positions is arbitrary and unjustified. He argues that the only solution is to postulate a Noumenal Sun which is invisible and shapeless. (To be more accurate, we should say the whole category of spatial or visual attributes is inapplicable to the Noumenal Sun.) All the experiences of the Round Sun, Square Sun and Hexagonal Sun are unveridical, literally speaking. Nevertheless, the Round Sun, Square Sun and Hexagonal Sun are *authentic* manifestations of the Noumenal Sun because they can all orient people appropriately to the Noumenal Sun. The Pluralist claims that his hypothesis is the best and most comprehensive explanation because it has taken account of all their experiences.³⁷ In contrast, each of the three schools has only taken account of one-third of the experiences, hence is inferior. How should we think of this Pluralist? Isn't it quite clear that the postulation of a Noumenal Sun here is rather farfetched and unnecessary? Moreover, his claim to comprehensiveness is bogus because the Pluralist's "taking account of an experience" amounts only to "granting that experience a merely phenomenal status." After he has "taken account of all the experiences," all experiences, at least one-third of which have been deemed reliable before, are now *completely* divorced from the Real Sun, from the cognitive viewpoint. I can imagine all three Schools protesting in one voice that the Pluralist is in fact contemptuous of all their experiences. Anyway, it is by no means clear that the Pluralist's position is superior to either School. The implications for religious pluralism should be clear.

To fully establish the superiority of the theistic interpretation of religious experiences, a lot more needs to be said. However, the purpose here is more modest. I just want to outline a reply to Hick's charge that from the perspective of the CTA, particularism is inferior to pluralism. The above discussions suggest that theism has more strategies to handle diverse religious experiences than Hick tends to believe, and those strategies are consonant with the CTA. Moreover, Hick's doctrine of the ineffability of the Real seriously endangers the *cognitive* validity of all religious experiences, which is exactly what the PCT is supposed to protect as far as possible. The tables are turned against Hick. Before he can satisfactorily deal with all the issues, it is premature for him to declare victory.

Conclusion

The CTA advises us to trust all religious experiences. A religious particular-

ist believes that only one world religion is basically correct. So on the surface it seems that a religious particularist cannot adopt the CTA. This is a misunderstanding. On the one hand, the trust advocated is only a *prima facie* trust. The CTA in itself does not favour any particular position on religious diversity because it *only* asserts the *prima facie* evidential force of religious experiences. We must bear in mind the *critical* elements of the CTA. If sufficient reasons are given for doubting religious experiences, the CTA can happily co-exist with atheism. On the other hand, while a religious particularist will not accept many religious experiences of other religions *at the highest level of description*, he does not need to deny that those experiences may contain elements of truth at a lower level of description. If he adopts the CTA, then he would think that in face of conflicting *prima facie* justified beliefs or experiences, it is rational to salvage something from them.

I have argued that this strategy is actually feasible in many other cases, and may also be feasible in the case of religious diversity. The presence of conflicts between religious experiences is not in itself a sufficient reason for adopting the atheist option. To do so would be analogous to rejecting *all* eye-witnesses' reports just because they conflict with one another. It may be possible to identify a "common core" of diverse religious experiences. While this does not settle the debates between religions, it may tip the balance towards a religious worldview. I have also indicated that type-unreliability can be combined with sub-type-reliability. So, for example, theistic experience can be separated from non-theistic experiences and then its sub-type-reliability investigated separately. (A similar strategy, of course, is open to believers of other religions.) Surely the problem of conflicts between theistic experience and theism-incompatible religious experiences remains. The theist need not insist that the conflict can be resolved entirely on neutral grounds; he need only show that he is not irrational in trusting his theistic experiences. How this position is to be worked out must be left for another time. The burden of this paper is that this position is compatible with the CTA, and is arguably superior to the atheist or pluralist solutions from the perspective of the CTA. (I leave open the possibility that Hick's hypothesis might be correct.) So it seems misguided to deny that religious exclusivism can be combined with the CTA.

Hong Kong Baptist University

NOTES

1. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. 13.

2. William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

3. For example, Matthew Bagger has repeatedly accused Alston of adopting a protective strategy which shields religious experiences from critical scrutiny. See his *Religious Experience, Justification, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *passim*.

4. John Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), p. 277.

5. A religion is not strictly correlated with only one type of religious experience but usually one type of religious experience is more prominent in a world religion than others. The importance of this point will be clearer later.

6. John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 19.

7. I adopt this classification scheme here for the sake of convenience. In fact I agree with Gavin D'Costa's claim that religious pluralism, on the deeper level, is still a kind of exclusivism ("The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32 [1996], pp. 223-232).

8. Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," p. 277.

9. William Alston, "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), pp. 433-448.

10. Thomas D. Senor, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

11. Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," p. 278.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

13. Michael Martin, "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), pp. 87-88.

14. In this paper I will not discuss explicitly the second approach: inclusivism. I tend to think that particularism and inclusivism are ideal types. In reality these two types of position merge into one another: most religious particularists want to be inclusive of some elements of truth in other religious traditions, and most inclusivists judge their own traditions to be particularly important to different degrees. Anyway, the distinction between particularism and inclusivism is not important in this paper. Atheists think that both have erroneously adopted a religious interpretation of reality, while pluralists like Hick will accuse both of being arbitrary.

15. I examine Hick's other arguments in another paper: "Does the Principle of Credulity Favour John Hick's Religious Pluralism? A Defense of William Alston."

16. D.Z. Phillips, "Review of Phillip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44 (1998), p. 62.

17. William Alston, "Response to Hick," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), p. 287.

18. John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 56.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 57; italics mine. This is also Alston's criterion. He thinks that a basic practice might be shown unreliable if there is "a massive and persistent inconsistency in its output" ["Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," p. 437.]

20. Actually it is not the case that a "common core" has to be shared by *all* the eye-witness accounts. *Sometimes* it is sufficient that it is shared by a large majority of the accounts, provided that either the error of the deviant witness can be explained, or superior explanatory power is attained by adopting the common core. Admittedly there are borderline cases in which we have to rely on our judgments.

21. Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 317.

22. One anonymous referee thinks that Gale's objection "is not that there is more inconsistency between perceptual mystical *reports* than between perceptual reports, but that there is diversity among mystical doxastic *practices* (different criteria for evaluating mystical reports, and so on), and *no* diversity among

sense perceptual practices." I would like to point out that the latter disanalogy *in itself* hardly constitutes a "cognitively invidious disanalogy." Why does the existence of merely different criteria show that religious experiences are unreliable? In fact it is not necessarily correct to claim that there is "no diversity among sense perceptual practices." It depends very much on how you individuate a sense perceptual practice. For example, there is no obvious reason why we cannot divide the larger sense perceptual practice into visual practice, auditory practice, tactual practice, olfactory practice, and so on. Obviously, the criteria for confirming a visual experience are different from those for an auditory experience or those for a tactual experience. The main thrust of Gale's argument is that all these smaller practices can be more or less united into one coherent sense perceptual practice because the outputs of those practices do not massively contradict one another. Just imagine that various kinds of mystical perceptual practices yield judgments which do not conflict massively, but can be weaved into a coherent whole. In that case we would tend to say that those different mystical practices with their different criteria are just like the different sense modalities. What then remains of Gale's objection? So it seems to me Gale's objection finally boils down to the conflicts between mystical perceptual reports.

23. This is a simplistic account but would not affect the latter argument.

24. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 183-4.

25. Mark Heim has a helpful discussion of this problem. See his "Saving the Particulars: Religious Experience and Religious Ends," *Religious Studies* 36.4 (December 2000), pp. 435-54, and *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

26. For example, consider a curve fitting example. When a lot of experimental data lie perfectly on a straight line, a single odd datum will surely be disregarded by most scientists. It is also important to bear in mind that the PCT can be formulated in different ways. Both Gary Gutting and William Lycan accept some forms of PCT but they only grant an isolated token experience a small *prima facie* evidential force. See Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 149-50; William Lycan, *Judgment and Justification* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 165-67. Moreover, it is possible to formulate the PCT only for a more or less established type of experience.

27. Caroline Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.191.

28. Jacques Maritain, *Challenges and Renewal* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, the World Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 97-98.

29. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 51.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

32. Perhaps Hick will rebut my claim by insisting that those experiences at least tell us that the Real is transcendental to the natural world and so on. However, as long as those experiences can tell us *something* that is really true of the Real, then I can hardly understand how the Real can at the same time be ineffable.

33. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 61.

34. Similar reasoning shows that the non-theistic interpretation of religious experience is also superior to pluralism. It at least preserves more or less intact one major type of religious experience, the monistic one. So both particularist interpretations conform better with the Principle of Conservation! Hick's sense of superiority is misplaced.

35. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 63.
36. Hick also rejects analogical language about the Real (*Ibid.*, p. 62).
37. Hick has made similar claims with respect to his religious pluralism (*A Christian Theology of Religions*, pp. 51, 62, 64.)